

BASIC BIBLE PRINCIPLES

FAITH

Scripture is clear—we are saved from sin and death because of our faith, not through any deeds that we do. Eternal life is God's gift, it cannot be earned.

“By grace [that is, an undeserved gift] are ye saved through faith” (Eph. 2:8);

“Therefore we conclude that a man is justified by faith without the deeds of the law” (Rom. 3:28).

What is faith?

Faith is synonymous in Scripture with belief; to have faith is to believe. It is therefore not a mysterious quality which people possess. The faith that saves is, however, not belief in just anything, but in what God has declared in the Scriptures—in particular, what He has said He will do.

Note how faith and belief are synonymous in the following passage: “But without faith it is impossible to please [God]; for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him” (Heb. 11:6).

What must we believe?

The things God wants us to believe are what He has revealed in the Bible, summarised as “the things concerning the kingdom of God, and the name of Jesus Christ” (Acts 8:12). God not only purposes to set up His Kingdom on earth, He has made it possible for sinful humans to live for ever in it by the work of Jesus Christ. This is the essence of what we must believe.

How do we obtain faith?

Faith is not given to us by God, it is our response to God. We cannot, because of our weak natures, perfectly obey God, but we can at least believe what He has revealed to us in His Word.

We cannot believe what we do not know, however; hence “faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Rom. 10:17). It was necessary first for God to give His Word; then we must hearken to it and believe it.

Developing faith

Faith does not come in an instant, however; it develops. We can think of three stages in developing faith:

- 1 The wonder and variety of the natural world should lead us to believe in the existence of a supreme Being Who created it.
- 2 Fulfilled prophecy should convince us that the Bible is uniquely the Word of this supreme Being so that we read it and believe it.
- 3 If we continue to read the Scriptures, we will recognise more and more their internal harmony and consistency, and the influence they have on us, and so grow in our faith. Also, our awareness of the hand of God at work in our lives and in the world will grow, and with this too our faith will grow.

Faith and works

Though we are saved by faith, not by works, true faith does not exist apart from works: “faith without works is dead” (Jas. 2:20). This means no more than that if we really believe something to be true then we act on it.

Abraham believed that God had the power to bring the dead to life, so he was prepared to sacrifice Isaac when God asked him to; Rahab believed that God was with Israel, and was prepared to help the Israelite spies (Jas. 2:21-26). Hebrews 11 is full of examples of people whose faith caused them to act; read carefully this chapter and note such words as ‘offered’, ‘prepared’, ‘went’, ‘blessed’, and so on.

We cannot say we have faith yet take no action. Declaring our belief in Christ is insufficient; association with him in baptism is required. Declaring our belief in God’s Kingdom is insufficient; we must try to live as would-be citizens of it now.

Abraham and faith

Abraham is presented in Scripture as the great example of faith. “Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness”, was declared of Abraham when he believed God’s promises, and is quoted of him three times in the New Testament (Gen. 15:6; Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6; Jas. 2:23).

The life of Abraham shows that he constantly believed God’s promises, and based his life on them: leaving his home to go to Canaan in the belief that he would inherit it for ever; believing that God would give him and Sarah a son, even when it was humanly impossible; even being prepared to sacrifice that son at God’s command.

The life of Abraham also illustrates the development of faith. When God counted Abraham as righteous because of his faith he was about eighty (*cf.* Gen. 16:16). James says that when Abraham was prepared to offer up Isaac he was showing that his faith was perfect (mature, or complete), and Genesis 15:6 was fulfilled (Jas. 2:22,23). By this time he was well over 100. His faith had developed to maturity over the years.

Justification by faith

Justification means ‘counting as righteous’. God says that, though we are sinners, He will count us as being righteous if we truly have faith, just as he counted Abraham as righteous through his faith (Rom. 4:3-5). Note the constant recurrence of ‘count’, ‘reckon’ and ‘impute’ in Romans 4—all the same Greek word.

Trust and faithfulness

Though faith Biblically is synonymous with belief, ‘belief’ in normal English usage is perhaps too weak a term to convey fully the Biblical idea of faith. Perhaps we might like to think of faith as believing what God has said and trusting in Him to carry it out; or as not only initially believing in what God has said, but remaining basically faithful to that belief all our lives, in the face of difficulties, and despite times of doubt and sinfulness. Such ideas give a deeper meaning to this vital concept of faith.

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